

The Mandalorian and Disney Plus: The media giant targets the small screen

Matthew MacEgan
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Created by Jon Favreau; Directed by Dave Filoni, Rick Famuyiwa, Deborah Chow, Bryce Dallas Howard and Taika Waititi

In mid-November 2019, Disney launched its new streaming service, Disney Plus. The latter's big launch-day title was *The Mandalorian*, the first live-action *Star Wars* television series.

The first season included eight episodes released on a weekly basis and was created and written by Jon Favreau, best known for directing *Iron Man* (2008), as well as the recent Disney remakes of *The Jungle Book* (2016) and *The Lion King* (2019).

This first season of *The Mandalorian* takes place five years after the conclusion of the original *Star Wars* trilogy (*Return of the Jedi* [1983]), in a time and place where the "Galactic Empire" has been defeated and a "New Republic" has emerged to reorganize political life in the galaxy. The events are set across several planets and areas of space known as the "Outer Rim," where the New Republic has little influence and criminal activity is rife.

The protagonist, simply called "The Mandalorian" or "Mando" (Pedro Pascal) throughout the series, is a bounty hunter who wears his people's traditional Mandalorian armor, and is known for taking on the most dangerous and difficult jobs for high fees. The first episode puts him on a job where he must retrieve an unknown "target" for an enigmatic former imperial official, using an electronic tracking device. The target turns out to be a toddler of a strange species who is able to move large objects with his mind.

The Mandalorian initially hands "the Child" over to the imperials, but soon after has a change of heart, attacks their compound, and rescues the Child. The rest of the series deals with the Mandalorian evading other pursuing bounty hunters and eventually confronting the

imperials directly to stop their pursuit for good.

Along the way, he builds working relationships with former Rebel Alliance shock trooper Cara Dune (Gina Carano), alien "moisture farmer" Kuiil (Nick Nolte), leader of a bounty hunter guild Greef Karga (Carl Weathers) and former assassin droid IG-11 (Taika Waititi), all of whom band together with the Mandalorian in the final two episodes to confront the "evil" imperials.

In addition to the attention this series has received due to its belonging to the *Star Wars* universe and the first large-scale television series produced for Disney Plus, *The Mandalorian* has also seen its popularity rise through word-of-mouth and social media buzz due to the presence and "cuteness" of the Child. This new character belongs to the same species as the popular *Star Wars* character Yoda—who first appeared in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)—but in toddler form who has yet to even learn to speak. The Child has become popularly known as "Baby Yoda," and is set to create a whirlwind of revenue from new toys and plush dolls in the coming months.

The series also comes with a dose of pessimism regarding the aftermath of revolutionary events. In this time period after the fall of the totalitarian Galactic Empire, which George Lucas created to mimic Nazism in many of its visual representations, one of the points that is made by many of the characters, and seemingly the writers, is that without the Empire, the galaxy has become lawless and inefficient. The New Republic, which is supposed to represent a new awakening of democracy, is spurned as being terribly inefficient, and the implication is that the Empire, like Benito Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy, supposedly "made the trains run on time." The two options presented to the audience, whether the creators intend this or not, is

that the world can either be put into order by a totalitarian force or left in a lawless, anarchic state.

As for the story and the characters, as one has come to expect from the *Star Wars* franchise, it leans heavily on tropes and plotlines of past cinema, particularly the films of Akira Kurosawa and Sergio Leone in this instance. The Mandalorian character borrows from Toshiro Mifune's "Sanjuro" in Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961) and its sequel, *Sanjuro* (1962), and Clint Eastwood's "Man with No Name" in Leone's trilogy, *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966).

There is even an entire episode ("Chapter 4: Sanctuary") that imitates beat for beat the story of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954). The Mandalorian and Cara Dune train a village of farmers to defend themselves against a band of raiders who regularly pilfer their food stores.

Another episode ("Chapter 6: The Prisoner") contains scenes reminiscent of *Die Hard* (1988). Yet another ("Chapter 5: The Gunslinger") sends the Mandalorian to the planet Tatooine, where much of the first *Star Wars* (1977) took place, and even sends him to the same cantina visited by Luke Skywalker and Ben Kenobi where he sits down at the same table where the pair negotiated with Han Solo, all painstakingly recreated from the original film.

What do all of these references and imitations of other films and tropes do for *The Mandalorian*? Not much. Aside from intriguing film buffs or *Star Wars* fans who may recognize settings or plot points from their favorite moments in film history, the story is unoriginal and uninteresting. The dialogue is filled with one-liners and bad jokes, delivered by a slew of comedians cast in many of the supporting roles, including Horatio Sanz, Amy Sedaris and Bill Burr.

The filmmakers and producers rely more on these familiar names and settings as well as name recognition with popular action-film stars like Carl Weathers (*Rocky* [1976] and *Predator* [1987]), rather than on a story that contributes something creative or meaningful to the artistic universe. *The Mandalorian* is essentially a parody of the action-adventure film genre set in the *Star Wars* universe.

Disney's CEO Bob Iger announced early in 2019 that the company would be shifting its focus onto "direct-to-

consumer" business moving forward, and therefore pushed billions of dollars into Disney Plus before its launch. *The Mandalorian*, with its episodes ranging from 33 to 49 minutes each, reportedly cost \$15 million per episode to produce.

This shift toward an attempt to dominate the streaming "direct-to-consumer" market was also part of the impetus behind Disney's acquisition of 21st Century Fox, much of which will be funneled into the Hulu streaming service, which Disney also controls. Hulu is slated to be the official streaming home of FX beginning in March, and, during that same month, Disney Plus will launch in international markets across western Europe. Disney plans to roll out this service worldwide within two years so as not to cede any ground to Netflix.

Disney currently offers consumers a bundle that includes Disney Plus, Hulu and ESPN Plus for \$12.99 per month. This shifting of so many brands beneath the Disney banner (Pixar, Marvel, Lucasfilm, 21st Century Fox) has meant that a good deal of content has been removed from Netflix, which has been the dominant "direct-to-consumer" streaming leader for many years. This has also been accompanied by the release of 10 exclusive originals on Disney Plus at the time of its launch, and, by 2024, Disney's goal is to release 65 annual exclusive originals.



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